



Fred Wiseman's Documentaries: Theory and Structure

Bill Nichols

Film Quarterly, Vol. 31, No. 3. (Spring, 1978), pp. 15-28.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28197821%2931%3A3%3C15%3AFWDTAS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E>

Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Otar
Ioseliani
(standing,
right)
during the
shooting of
PASTORALE



mother and his wife, both docile, knit away in city comfort. The young daughter turns out to be one of the musicians and she brings back some apples from the village. Her father sits quietly

and munches one of them; from the faraway farms and flowering cheffy trees, it is his only link with the ancient, the *real* Georgia.

—ALBERT JOHNSON

BILL NICHOLS

Fred Wiseman's Documentaries: Theory and Structure

The history of thought is the history of its models.

—Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*

The final film is a theory about the event, about the subject in the film.

—Frederick Wiseman, interview

A problem plagues me. Namely this: modern film theory examines films as systems of signs whose significance derives primarily from internal relationships and not from external reference to another realm or system (usually taken to be "reality"). Traditional film theory has assumed a certain transparency between sign (image) and referent (reality). Eisenstein sought to transcend

it, Bazin to celebrate it. And even today this assumption remains most powerful in documentary film study, an area to which modern theory has given scant attention. What happens, however, if we refuse to trust the image's transparency, if we refuse to take on faith this apparent re-presentation of reality itself? What happens if we hypothesize that this transparency is an effect produced by work in and upon a system of signs and codes, that it is the site of formal and ideological strategies of considerable significance in their own right? This article seeks to answer these questions in relation to the documentary films of Frederick Wiseman.

Wiseman's films form a distinctive grouping in that they are virtually all studies of tax-sup-

ported, public institutions: *Titicut Follies* (1967) about a mental institution, *High School* (1969), *Law and Order* (1969) about a city police force, *Hospital* (1971), *Basic Training* (1971) about the US Army, *Juvenile Court* (1973), *Primate* (1974) about federally-supported primate research, and *Welfare* (1975).¹ Partly because these kinds of institutions are familiar to most viewers and partly because of the films' structure, a strong tendency exists to read the films like Rorschach tests in which responses are a function of pre-dispositions toward the institutions or towards Wiseman's distinctive, and subjective, style. Before analyzing this style in detail it may therefore be useful to precipitate some of these pre-dispositions by way of a few summary points.

1. Wiseman disavows conventional notions of tact, breaking through what would otherwise be ideological² constraints of politeness, respect for privacy, queasiness in the face of the grotesque or taboo, the impulse to accentuate the positive, etc. (A two-minute-long take of a patient vomiting in *Hospital* is one striking example of this aspect of Wiseman's approach.) Wiseman's "tactlessness" allows him not to be taken in by institutional rhetoric; it helps him disclose the gap between rhetoric and practice. But this lack of tact also pulls Wiseman's cinema toward the realm of voyeurism and visual pleasure; a very striking aspect of his films on first viewing, this threatens to block access to those more conceptual or formal strategies discussed here. Tactlessness thus provides a tension which requires further exploration but lies beyond the scope of the present discussion.

PRIMATE



2. Wiseman's films are documentary primarily in their *cinéma vérité* approach to recording the pro-filmic event (discussed further below). They are secondarily documentary in re-presenting a recognizable aspect of social existence in our culture (encounters with tax-supported institutions). This is a distinctive choice of subject among *cinéma-vérité* film-makers and challenges assumptions about the individual as the locus of social interaction (and, in the guise of "characters," as the locus of narrative).

3. Wiseman's films fall within the experimental film-making tradition in terms of their overall formal organization and within the narrative tradition in their local organization (the level of the sequence). Wiseman achieves a cinematic whole akin to the overall structure of films by Jean-Luc Godard, Michael Snow, Bruce Baillie, or Bruce Conner while at the level of the sequence he devises an editing pattern similar in its effect to the continuity editing of classical narrative. The overall structure of Wiseman's films is decidedly non-narrative (lacking closure, a diachronic trajectory, and the full deployment of the codes of actions and enigmas which usually pose and subsequently resolve puzzles or mysteries by means of the characters' activities.)³ At the same time the overall structure is built from facets themselves narrative-like (in their construction of a singular diegesis—the imaginary space and time of a narrative).

Wiseman's films all utilize the documentary mode of indirect address, that is, the viewer is not explicitly acknowledged by the film: characters do not look at the camera nor speak directly to us, nor does a narrator speak directly to us as in the classic voice-of-god commentary of a film like *The River* (Pare Lorentz, 1937). Although an exploratory attempt has been made to consider direct-address documentaries in the light of modern film theory, the indirect-address documentary remains virgin territory.⁴

Wiseman's films thus fall within the amorphous category of *cinéma vérité* documentary, but they also belong to a more distinct sub-category, characterized by their almost exclusive use of indirect address (the absence of commentary, interviews with the film-maker, and even extra-diegetic music or sound effects), the lack of staged or reenacted events (acknowledging but minimizing

WISEMAN

the “staging” provoked by the camera’s presence), and the reliance upon social actors (individuals, or “characters,” acting their normal social roles). This kind of *cinéma vérité* adopts a modified form of the continuity editing found in classical narrative films to present an imaginary spatial and temporal universe (the diegesis). The practitioners of this style include Richard Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, the Maysles brothers, William Jersey, John Marshall, Asen Balicki, David MacDougall, Allan King and Craig Gilbert, but Wiseman’s films stand out as a particularly pure example.

Stephen Mamber claims that this kind of *cinéma vérité* involves “a faith in unmanipulated reality, a refusal to tamper with life as it presents itself.”⁵ The ghost of André Bazin notwithstanding, neither Wiseman nor the others mentioned create a neutral or objective style; indeed we often hear charges of manipulation or bias against Wiseman. His choice of “characters,” of types of encounter, and his choice of camera angle and distance (especially extreme close-ups) are obviously expressive indicators within Wiseman’s stylistic repertoire.⁶ From such crucial, ideologically informed aspects of style it is possible to gauge Wiseman’s attitude toward his subject. The concern here, however, will be with larger formal questions in the hope of teasing open those ideological implications of style embedded in the organizing principles of the parts, the whole, and the part/whole relationships of Wiseman’s films. Let us begin by noting how Wiseman’s own style departs from classical narrative.

First, Wiseman’s style is statistically different. Barry Salt analyzed a variety of feature films and found that the average shot length for classic Hollywood films was around 9-10 seconds.⁷ Average shot length for a 30-min. passage from Wiseman’s *Hospital* is 32 seconds. Such results are not statistically rigorous but are highly suggestive. A tabulation of closeness of shot (from extreme close-up to very long shot) for the same passage from *Hospital* also reveals a significant departure from the classical pattern: Wiseman’s films rely far more heavily upon the closest shots with fewer medium to long shots than the narrative films analyzed by Salt.

Second, Wiseman’s style does not function strictly within a narrative context. The whole is



BASIC TRAINING

not organized as a narrative but more poetically, as a mosaic; only the parts have a diegetic unity. Between sequences editing seldom establishes a chronological relationship: sequences follow each other consecutively but without a clearly marked temporal relationship. The whole thus tends toward poetry (metaphor, synchronicity, paradigmatic relations)—an all-at-once slice through an institutional matrix re-presented in time—rather than narrative.

Although “mosaic” is a useful term to describe the structure of Wiseman’s films, they are mosaics of a distinctive kind. In a conventional mosaic the *tesserae* (facets) merge to yield a coherent whole when seen from a distance whereas an individual facet conveys little sense of the overall design.⁸ The *tesserae* (or sequences) of a Wiseman film are already coherent and do not merge into one impression or one narrative tale so much as supplement each other (with each sequence conveying a recognizable aspect of the overall design). The whole of a mosaic is almost invariably embedded in a larger architectural whole, but such a larger whole is absent in Wiseman’s case; not only do the films stand on their own, they offer little overt acknowledgment that the institutions under study directly relate to a larger social context. (Though we might, perhaps, think of each Wiseman film as a facet in a mosaic constituted by his overall oeuvre.) Both kinds of mosaic, however, clearly exhibit their facets as facets, a strategy that associates the structure of Wiseman’s films with cinematic collage as well as traditional mosaic.

The addition of new facets in Wiseman's films helps complete our picture but also constitutes it in such a way that completion in any absolute sense becomes impossible (each new facet proposes a new lack at the same time as it fills in a previous one). Thus, whereas a narrative can be complete when the ending resolves a lack initiated in the beginning, Wiseman's films lack narrative closure itself. They are associational rather than expository, or poetic rather than assertive or narrative.

Much debate revolves around definitions of narrative structure but, without attempting to resolve this debate, it may still be possible to specify at least one consequence of the difference between Wiseman's mosaic structure and narrative structure. Narrative requires the adoption of assumptions or codes governing the inclusion, exclusion, and arrangement of events. Will Wright argues that "these assumptions amount to an explanation of the events, in the sense that they provide reasons why the final events follow from, are the result of, the earlier events."⁹ Put differently, narrative accounts for a change between initial and final states by means of "an intervening description of actions or occurrences that account for that change."¹⁰

Lacking narrative structure, Wiseman's films also lack this kind of linear-causality explanation of events. They do, however, pose a theory of the events they describe—one consonant with a mosaic structure and at variance with a model of linear causality. Eschewing narrative on the one hand and the documentary mode of direct address on the other (where an explanation can be explicitly announced by a narrator), Wiseman adopts an alternative principle of organization with a corresponding basic shift in assumptions about the arrangement of and relationship between events. This principle is: mosaic structure of the whole but narrative structure of the parts (the sequences). It assumes that social events are multiply-caused, and must be analyzed as a web of interconnecting influences and patterns. It is dialectical rather than mechanical.

Though Wiseman's films are not narratives, his sequences tend to be of two types in Metz's classification of the *grande syntagmatique* of classical narrative film: "scenes" and "descrip-

tive syntagmas." Unlike the scene, the descriptive syntagma does not convey a sense of temporal progression; objects shown in successive images enjoy a relationship of spatial coexistence.¹¹ In Wiseman's films such descriptive sequences are not full-blown: they are more suggestive than wholly assertive. Through their very brevity they acquire a surplus of meaning that takes off from the specificity of each shot and evokes the general milieu (the institution) from which they are taken. Wiseman's scenes represent "a spatio-temporal integrality experienced as being without flaws . . . those brusque effects of appearance or disappearance . . ."¹² but they tend to blur into what Metz calls the "ordinary sequence" where the temporal order is discontinuous and unorganized.¹³

We may also analyze the spatio-temporal flow of scenes and ordinary sequences into what Vladimir Propp calls "functions" (and Barthes "actions"): "a noun expressing an action" or "an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action."¹⁴ Here, however, the difference in overall structure of Wiseman's films compared to narrative films makes itself felt. Wiseman's sequences are like narrative sequences diegetically, and thus can be roughly catalogued in Metz's taxonomy; but they are quite unlike narrative sequences in the nature and arrangement of the functions. Since Wiseman's functions are in fact governed by social interactions in institutions they differ from Propp's more "mythological" narrative functions in several ways.

If we say that agents carry out functions (such as "the hero leaves home," "the hero is tested," "the villain is defeated," "the hero returns home") and are individuated as characters, then these principles apply to Wiseman's films as well as to narratives. But in Wiseman's films the agents carry out functions determined by the institutional structure in which they are embedded rather than by a narrative structure. The institution imposes certain functions and excludes others; it acts like a code or a *langue* similar to a narrative code. Like a narrative code it is extracinematic but capable of being recruited into a cinematic structure.

One striking characteristic of this institutional code (or the portion Wiseman considers) is that

WISEMAN

the kinds of agents it requires are very limited in number. In fact only two dominate: the hero and his complement to which can be added, secondarily, helpers. The hero is roughly analogous to the fictional hero in structural analyses but the complement is unlike the fictional villain: the complement is the character necessary for the hero to carry out the functions assigned him by the institutional code. Sociologically, such processes are described under the rubric of role-playing, but what is peculiar to the institutional role-playing studied by Wiseman is that it always involves a complementary relationship in Gregory Bateson's sense: "To this category we may refer all those cases in which the behavior and aspirations of the members of two groups are fundamentally different."¹⁵ In fact, they are usually oppositional as in assertive/submissive or nurturing/dependent behavior and tend toward schismogenic escalation—increased assertiveness begets increased submissiveness—and the breakdown of the system unless moderated by negative feedback (a feature present in institutions but seldom detailed in Wiseman's films). This schismogenic quality also corresponds very closely to Marx's notion of class struggle: the "fundamental differences" alluded to by Bateson are often class differences. Placement of the encounters between institutions and clients in these terms, however, is not attempted by Wiseman even though the encounters themselves cannot be fully understood without reference to class and class struggle.

Additionally, the institutional code governs the interaction of numerous heroes and complements in as much as it governs the relationships between existing social groups or classes. It is feasible to isolate a hero and follow the sequence of functions he performs and this is a choice many documentaries make—for example, *A Time for Burning* (William Jersey, 1966) or *A Married Couple* (Allan King, 1970). But Wiseman opts not to do this. Instead of following one hero through a large set of functions as in narrative, Wiseman follows many heroes through a small set of functions (each hero's performance of a function usually constituting one facet of the overall mosaic). The heroes are often individuated as characters but a repertoire of characters is picked up, followed, and dropped as they perform a few select functions over and over.



JUVENILE COURT

Wiseman's mosaic structure does not establish a fixed series of moves (in Propp's analysis, an invariant succession of functions) that could constitute a narrative whole. Instead functions recur throughout a film, but individual characters do not. Characters, as represented by social actors, carry out functions and thereby give individuality to the agent types, but this relationship is not locked into a single mold: there are many characters, there is no "star." The processes of identification between viewer and hero/actor/star that occur in most narrative films are side-stepped as well as the ideological consequences of fusing these three distinct realms into one seemingly coherent image.¹⁶ Wiseman's films move away from this imaginary homogeneity toward what Stephen Heath calls "figure": the character as a "point of dispersion, a kind of disarticulation."¹⁷ This reasserts a dialectical relationship between cinematic structure and social reality by refusing to subsume or conflate the two through imaginary unities like "star."

Thus the accumulation of scenes in Wiseman yields a metaphorical effect rather than a metonymic one and narrative succumbs to poetry. A displacement of the comfortable on-looker positioning of the spectator that dominates classical narrative is achieved, akin to that of many experimental films. This contrasts with films by other *cinéma vérité* practitioners where a full-fledged narrative analysis along Proppian lines may prove instructive.

Insofar as Wiseman substitutes characters for one another in variations on the performance of a few functions it would seem likely that these functions could be isolated and identified. Util-

izing the procedures described by Will Wright in *Sixguns and Society* I have attempted this for *Titicut Follies*, *High School*, *Law and Order*, *Hospital*, *Basic Training*, and *Juvenile Court*. The result is the following eleven functions:

1. The hero is a member of and acts on behalf of an institution; he enjoys a special status.

2. The complement is initially a member of society; he lacks special status.

3. The hero determines whether to interact with a social actor as his complement or not. (This involves "fact-finding" in *Juvenile Court* and *Law and Order* and "diagnosis" in *Hospital* and *Titicut Follies*.)

4. The hero isolates his complement from society at large into a special group under his control.

5. The hero imparts values or knowledge (social or institutional) to his complement. (The complement may contest the hero's actions but usually to little avail; this is discussed further below since contestation is more generally a key contributor to social change.)

6. The hero accepts his complement as one of his own. (In the graduation and promotion ceremonies in *Basic Training* primarily, though hierarchical rankings are retained.)

7. The hero seeks to control or modify the behavior of his complement. (This may involve long or short term modification—sentence terms in *Juvenile Court*, "discipline" in *High School*, arrests in *Law and Order*, and physical or mental modification—medical treatment in *Hospital* or psychiatric treatment in *Titicut Follies*.)

8. The hero seeks to protect society from the harmful acts of his complement. (In which case function 3 takes on added importance.)

9. The hero seeks to aid a complement in distress. (Function 3 may be a precondition or "a social actor in distress" may define a complement.)

10. Heroes or complements relax among themselves. (In Wiseman's films, though, they are always recognizable in terms of their roles; for example, we may see an Army recruit with his family but he is in uniform at a military base, not at home.)

11. Helpers (janitors, orderlies, receptionists, etc.) maintain the hero's institutional facilities.

These broadly defined functions may seem overly obvious, but sometimes a task of analysis is precisely to point out what may seem obvious. Very often it may be so taken for granted that we fail to see how to organize the obvious into categories that can relate it to the not-so-obvious. In the case of Wiseman's functions it is striking that so disparate a range of institutions and events can be reduced to so few functions. (We should bear in mind that Wiseman studies a particular aspect of institutions, though—their interface or boundary with society at large.)

It is also striking that even though some of the functions can be arranged into narrative sequences in which the middle term explains the difference or change between the first and last terms, this very seldom occurs in the actual arrangement of functions in Wiseman's films. Functions 4, 5, 6, for example, compose such a sequence but do not occur in that order at the level of either facets (sequences) or the whole. (*Basic Training* and *High School* display this arrangement to some degree at the level of the whole; the parts in each case, though, fail to chart a linear progression of intervening functions and instead favor variations on recurrent functions, as in the other films. As such, this gross arrangement is at best a very weak form of narrative.)

Another result of Wiseman's non-narrative organization of functions is the loss of certain predictive possibilities present in a narration chain of functions. Since the middle function explains the difference between initial and final states we can often predict the final state if we know the initial and middle functions (story tellers often play upon this predictive tendency in a variety of ways). Rather than an anticipatory relationship to the text, Wiseman's mosaic structure and the supplementary nature of the facets frequently demand a retroactive relationship to the text. On first encounter we have no way of even anticipating a sequence's duration (since the characters and functions it introduces bear no necessary relationship to the succeeding sequence). Sequences in *Hospital*, for example, may elaborate on function 9 over a considerable number of shots and minutes or may encompass the same, abbreviated function in one shot lasting a matter of

seconds. This kind of "play" within the text is integral to our reading of it and recalls the *Cahiers du Cinéma* editors' distinction between turning a film into a text readable a priori and making the reading itself participate in the film's process of becoming-a-text."¹⁸ (This is exemplified in the detailed analysis which follows.)

. . . the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.

—Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*

The mosaic structure of Wiseman's films implies an attitude toward the institutions he studies, but due to the utilization of indirect address, this attitude is never explicit. Wiseman's films become unlabelled metaphors (lacking a word or figure for "like") rather than statements, as documentaries in direct address can be. As such his films challenge the convention of causal or deterministic explanation characteristic of narrative and direct-address commentary (which did not earn the name "voice-of-god" by accident). At this level Wiseman's films propose an epistemology with remarkable kinship to some of the premises of systems theory. The supplementary or associational nature of Wiseman's mosaic pattern stresses goal-seeking and constraints more than determinism and causality. A later event does not occur because of a previous event as it does in narrative; rather any event occurs because of the constraints imposed upon all events (within a given system—in Wiseman's case, the system governed by the institutional code): "In other words, a description of the possible behavior of the 'organism' 'in itself' is inadequate without a description of the constraints exerted on those possibilities by the 'environment.' . . . in this perspective it is not a question of 'why such-and-such happened' but a question of what constraints operated so that 'the same old thing' or 'anything at all' DIDN'T happen."¹⁹ The most recurring constraints in Wiseman's films are those of institution and role, especially in terms of how they are manifest at the boundary between an institution and those with whom it interacts.

This is perhaps most evident in the translation processes that occur at the boundary. Messages from numerous codes are translated into the

dominant code of the institution, a process which also involves repression. Everything that cannot be translated, even though it may be understood, is repressed. Agents of the institution cannot respond to untranslated material within the constraints of the institutional code. In this respect the facets of Wiseman's mosaics evoke the similarity of encounters, the characteristic profile of typical communication at the interface between an institution and those who encounter it. The power of the process of typification involved in institutions and roles is best demonstrated by recalling that many of these highly structured encounters occur between complete strangers who are nonetheless willing to play their parts before a camera.

Individual social actors, despite the prescriptions of their roles, do struggle to respond to messages they understand on the level they are meant but they are constrained to respond in relation to the institutional code defining their roles. Significantly, even in the synchronic moment displayed by a Wiseman film, minor acts of subversion, little contestations, take place—exploiting "free play" within the presiding code. The psychiatrist in the scene analyzed below, for example, seeks to obtain welfare aid for his patient long after he is aware that the welfare system ("played" by Miss Hightower) cannot translate his message: his patient is technically ineligible. Likewise in an earlier scene Dr. Schwartz, the doctor described below who aids a fellow on a "bum trip," telephones another hospital to complain about their improper transfer of a patient. In *High School* a group of students clearly articulate their school's limitations ("morally, socially, this school is a garbage can") even though when lunch is over they slip back (or are slipped back) into the roles they criticize.

The dialectic of individual and institution suggested here is a long way from Durkheimian functionalism, or the kind of structural determinism evidenced, for example, in the work of Louis Althusser and some film theorists who have adopted his thought to the cinema. Only ongoing struggle can yield significant changes in institutional structure or social organization, but even Wiseman's synchronic studies posit a base for this process in their description of role-playing, play-

ing²⁰ or what are called, more politically, “resistance strategies,” in Brecher and Costello’s *Common Sense for Hard Times* (New York: Two Continents, 1976). Whether the resistance comes from hero (the psychiatrist and Dr. Schwartz in *Hospital*, for example) or complement (some of the students in *High School*, patients in *Titicut Follies*, and recruits in *Basic Training*) much of the subjective “bias” in Wiseman’s style suggests Wiseman’s own sympathy and support for those whose resistance provides an initiating moment for social change.

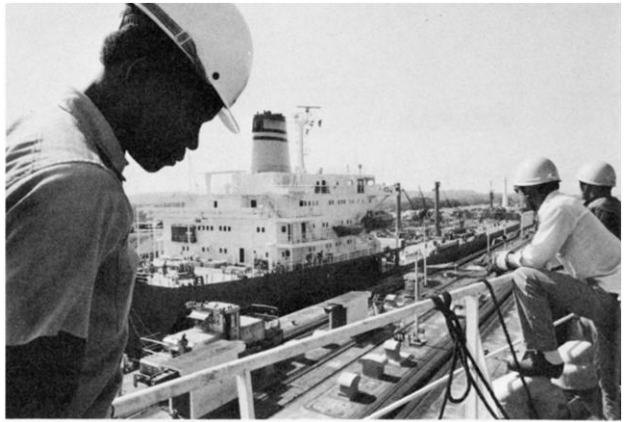
One of the things that intrigues me in all the films is how to make a more abstract, general statement about the issues, not through the use of a narrator, but through the relationship of events to each other through editing.

—Frederick Wiseman, interview

In order to examine the relationship of events to each other without recourse to direct-address commentary, Wiseman requires a site upon which to base his examination. This site is the diegetic plane of spatial and temporal unity. As in fiction it provides the arena in which agents carry out functions, albeit functions governed by an institutional code rather than a narrative one. The diegesis supports Wiseman’s study not of individuals but of an ensemble of social relations.

As in classical narrative, the construction of the diegesis depends upon continuity editing. Such editing sutures the traces, the cuts or gaps, of its own production to conjure up a plausible but imaginary universe. Wiseman’s formal organization relies heavily upon the ability to mask potentially huge gaps in the real time of the pro-filmic event within sequences. A good example is the scene with the psychiatrist in *Hospital* mentioned above. Donald E. McWilliams reports that the scene, uncut, lasted an hour and a half.²¹ On screen it lasts approximately ten minutes and yet appears to cover virtually the entire encounter.

Achieving this effect requires the use of some of the tactics of *découpage* derived from classic continuity editing of the image track but without many of its resources: Wiseman never shoots with more than one camera, for example.²² It also requires skillful manipulation of sound/image



Wiseman’s newest film, CANAL ZONE

relationships. The narrative film-maker can plan his shots and their accompanying sound beforehand to yield a sense of continuity and realism but Wiseman has minimal control over what his social actors do. Continuity emerges *ex post facto*, as a function of editing. If Wiseman’s strategies are at all instructive to political documentarists and theorists alike, as I believe they are, then it will be well worthwhile examining in detail how an imaginary continuity can be constructed in a situation where the film-maker controls the pro-filmic event so weakly.

This examination must focus on the joins or articulations between shots rather than between sequences. I propose to adopt several categories of spatial and temporal articulation involving the image and sound tracks. These derive from Noel Burch’s categories in *Theory of Film Practice*, modified to accommodate *cinéma vérité* editing as well as classical narrative.

First, for the image track there are three kinds of spatial articulation. *Spatial continuity* involves overlapping visual fields: if a character reappears it must be against an overlapping background. *Spatial proximity* lacks overlap and is implied by various cues such as matching—reoccurring objects or characters across a cut in which no large spatial displacement has been otherwise suggested, or eyeline matching and its sub-category, the point-of-view figure. *Spatial discontinuity* occurs when there is no overlap and no cues to proximity. Reoccurrence of a character may not overcome discontinuity if movement is stated or implied.

We can also identify three kinds of temporal articulation for the image track. *Temporal continuity* is when action appears continuous across a cut. This depends upon such devices as match-

cuts (which are rare in Wiseman who cannot stage his shots to provide the desired overlap of actions), inserts and shot/reverse shot figures which usually depend upon continuous sound as a cue to temporal continuity. Point-of-view figures also imply temporal continuity in most cases. Deviance is possible, though, leading to indefinite ellipses generally rather than flashbacks specifically as Edward Brannigan suggests.²³ Secondly a *definite temporal ellipsis* indicates a precise, measurable time gap. Since there is no absolute scale of reference to the diegesis, a temporal baseline must be established before the cut (the velocity of someone walking, for example). This articulation, often dependent upon scripted shots, is rare in Wiseman. Finally, unmeasurable time gaps are indicated by *indefinite temporal ellipses*. If the ellipsis involves *abridgment* the temporal flow continues to originate from a previously established coordinate (the onset of an interview, for example). Gaps in Metz's "ordinary sequence" are of this kind. In Wiseman's films where match-cutting is difficult, such elisions often take the form of jump-cuts. If the elision involves a *shift* the temporal flow is reset to a new time scale. Such cuts often occur between sequences as a function of the mosaic structure in Wiseman. Also, deviant point-of-view shots may represent abridgments or shifts which can usually be determined only by a retroactive reading of the cut.

For the sound track it is more useful to analyze its relationship to articulations of the image track than to examine its own articulations which are, in fact, often impossible to determine from a film print. (Access to mixing sheets would generally be essential since there may be overlapping articulations of speech, music, and location sound.) Spatial articulations of the sound track play little role in Wiseman and have been deferred (although they are very significant in Robert Altman's films, a director with many striking similarities to Wiseman). Temporal relationships implied by the sound track at points of image track articulation are crucial, however, since they often resolve or determine how to read the articulation. In Wiseman's films these relationships normally involve the verbal sound track

("presence" or location sound is usually continuous throughout a scene and music absent). *Temporal continuity* involves speech continuing uninterrupted across a visual cut (a sound bridge). *Temporal proximity* involves speech before and after a visual cut which is closely related either logically or analogically (tone of voice, rhythm or loudness, for example). Slight logical or analogical shifts often serve as cues to temporal elision the magnitude of which is seldom discernible. *Temporal discontinuity* involves verbal statements bearing no clear relationship to each other. This relationship usually prevails between sequences.

In the analysis which follows, these categories are applied to a representative segment of *Hospital*. In overview, we are dealing with four units or facets which comprise a segment dealing with hospital/social deviant interactions ("deviant" strictly in a descriptive sense): A1-8,* B9-16 and C17—three syntagms that comprise an "ordinary sequence" about a psychiatrist/homosexual patient encounter; D1-4 about a hospital staff/alcoholic encounter; E1, a doctor/drug addict encounter; and F1-9, a doctor/drug-overdose-victim encounter. The letter and number designations indicate articulations; in the parentheses the running time of the second shot is given in minutes and seconds; and the conventional abbreviations of shot type help specify the kind of visual cut

A1
A2



*Capital letters designate syntagmas, numbers designate shots.

involved. Slash-marks indicate cuts. Some of the articulations which repeat previous strategies have been omitted.

A1/A2 (1:20). MS of patient named Mr. Vivas/CU of Mr. Vivas.

Spatial continuity occurs because of overlap but the editing lacks match and appears as a jump cut. We must attend to the sound track to determine whether the articulation involves temporal continuity or proximity. In this case the last statement before the cut is:

Mr. Vivas, (before the cut, in shot A1)

There are things that are not normal
and this is what I mean.

After the cut we hear:

Doctor (in shot A2)

I want to establish one thing with you.

No clear case for continuity exists but proximity and abridgment are indicated by the word logic of the cut: the doctor's statement appears to continue a line of thought established prior to the cut.

A2/A2a (:06). CU patient/CU doctor.

The new shot is read as an insert due to visual and aural cues. We hear the doctor begin to interrupt before we cut ("Mr. Vivas . . .") but the patient continues his previous line of thought as we cut to the doctor whose expression indicates a certain eagerness to speak. The insert also exhibits an eyeline match: Mr. Vivas on the right of the screen/the doctor looking screen right. Because Wiseman cuts from CU to CU spatial continuity is difficult to establish (there is minimal background and no overlap) but the close-ups also establish a graphic match between the two faces which helps reduce the impression of a jump cut.

A2a/A3 (:15). CU doctor/MS patient.

This articulation involves a normal point-of-view shot showing whom the doctor sees (Mr. Vivas) and implies temporal continuity. The sound track reinforces this sense of continuity by an articulation based on word logic:

Patient (before the cut, in shot A2a)

I would assure you that it would do me
a heck of a lot of good

Patient (after the cut, A3)

. . . 'cause I'm having somewhat of a
difficulty obtaining what is known as social
service with, in other words, welfare.



A2a
A3

Between A2a and A3, however, there is a slight shift in Mr. Vivas's tone and rhythm. These analogical cues suggest that Wiseman may have omitted an indeterminate amount of dialogue and joined together two statements which still maintain a logical progression. The possibility of abridgment emerges but its actual presence or extent cannot be determined exactly. The image track articulation implies continuity. The sound track's word logic reinforces this implication even as it leaves cues to possible abridgment. The articulation's ultimate ambiguity is characteristic of Wiseman's films and of the *imaginary* continuity of the diegesis generally; it also clearly illustrates the central importance of sound/image relationships to Wiseman's editing style.

A5/A6 (:52). CU patient/CU patient.

Spatial continuity is implied by overlapping background and reappearance of the patient. The graphic match reduces the sense of a jump cut (as does Wiseman's long-take style). The sound track exhibits a slight pause and analog shift which could be a cue to abridgment although word logic gives a sense of a continuing line of thought (some degree of shift in logic and analog values is endemic to normal conversation, a quality Wiseman exploits to full advantage). The very fact that a cut occurs is perhaps the best, though still ambiguous, cue to abridgment since in terms of classical continuity editing it is unmotivated (showing the same character from approximately the same position—a 30° rule violation to boot):

Doctor (before the cut, in shot A5)

Because what?

Patient (before the cut)

Because I am a minor.

Patient (after the cut, in shot A6)

But you know, when I do go over to the welfare center they tell me, "And how have you been supporting yourself and eating and doing this and that?" And you know what I've been doing, prostituting . . .



A6
A7

A6/A7 (:18). CU Mr. Vivas/MS doctor, over patient's shoulder.

Spatial continuity emerges from the match element, the reappearance of the patient. This is the first two-shot in the sequence (3:20 or so into the encounter) and allows for a retroactive placement of the two characters in relation to one another. A slight logical and analogical shift in the doctor's dialogue before and after the cut is a cue to abridgment but, as elsewhere, its very slightness encourages a reading of temporal continuity:

Patient (before the cut,A6)

I have told them about it.

Doctor (before the cut, A6)

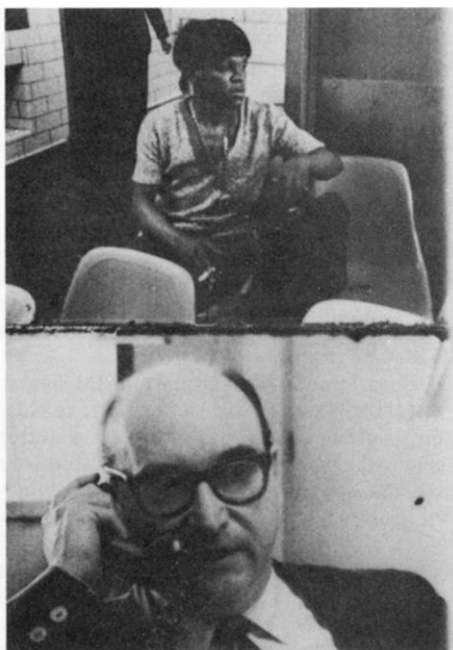
Yeh, I know. Well don't tell them any more. I'll tell them to forget it.

Doctor (after the cut, A7)

When a person tries as hard as he can to do the best he can and it doesn't work he gets very upset and confused and he thinks to himself, I must be all mixed up, there must be something wrong with me, I must be bad even though I don't feel it.

A8/B9 (:10). CU Mr. Vivas/LS hospital corridor.

This articulation signals spatial discontinuity and a temporal shift. A new source of presence appears (general corridor noise and paging messages) and continues throughout B9-B16, which develops as a descriptive syntagma of hospital corridors and people sitting in waiting rooms. The film abandons the doctor and patient as we seek to establish new spatial and temporal coordinates.



B16
C17

B16/C17 (4:55). MS Mr. Vivas, sitting on a waiting room bench/CU doctor on the telephone.

B16 concludes the descriptive syntagma by returning to the previous patient, Mr. Vivas. This return invites a retrospective analysis of the syntagma (has this description of "waiting" in general actually been a description of Mr. Vivas's waiting?) and implies, though by no means guarantees, that the next sequence may be a very direct supplement to A1-8.

C17 returns to the psychiatrist who interviewed Mr. Vivas, confirming one of the possibilities opened by B16. (In Wiseman's overall pattern, not returning to the psychiatrist is also entirely possible.) Temporal continuity arises from a sound bridge between the shots (we hear the doctor begin a conversation with Miss Hightower, a welfare worker, before we cut away from Mr. Vivas to the doctor). C17 continues for nearly five minutes as the doctor tries to obtain assistance for Mr. Vivas. His last words: "I don't wish for you to tell me that you don't know what you're going to do . . . (looking up) She hung up on me."

During the telephone exchange the doctor's role subtly shifts from hero to complement: his function as agent of the hospital's code becomes subordinated to Miss Hightower's function as agent of the welfare code. Wiseman's long take provides a coherent diegetic base for this transition and also retrospectively stands as the third part of an "ordinary sequence" composed of a scene, descriptive syntagma and autonomous shot. The three together complete a fairly well-elaborated account of functions 3 and 9 in which the descriptive syntagma represents a preparatory interval between "diagnosis" and "seeking to aid a complement."

Discontinuity between C17 and D1 demarcates two facets although the viewer must remain constantly alert to the possibility of a retroactive fusion (that A-F all involve a hospital/deviant interface, for example). D1-4 is much more brief (1:45) and breaks off before any clear-cut course of action is pursued to aid the patient. E1, a 35-second autonomous shot of another encounter, follows and again breaks off before "diagnosis" seems complete. This lack of completion is one of the qualities that allows facets to supplement one another and that demands active, and retroactive, engagement by the viewer.

The complete dialogue in shot E1:

Doctor (E1)

Do you drink? (patient mumbles, very garbled, slurred speech, inaudible)

Doctor

Do you inject the needle?

Patient (in wheelchair)

Yea . . .

Doctor

When did you inject? When did you inject? (pause) What, heroin?

Patient

(mumbles, inaudible)

Doctor

Well, you come over to the side, and I'll check . . .

(Doctor wheels patient out of frame)

E1/F1 (:47) MS hospital room where doctor and patient had been/MS Doctor (Dr. Schwartz) and patient in an emergency room.

This final sequence involves the administration of an emetic to a patient who has had a bum trip on a psychedelic drug. (F4 is a 2:15 shot of the patient vomiting profusely, as example of 'relentless empiricism' at its extreme.) Editing on word logic prevails throughout most of the scene and even introduces it. Dr. Schwartz seems to continue the same line of questioning pursued in E1 but in this case the patient responds far more articulately:

Doctor (beginning of F1)

What do you think they gave you? What did they give you?

Patient

They told me it was mescaline but I was chewing on it and it tasted sort of funny, like soap or something like that.

Doctor

Uh huh.

Patient

Shit.

Doctor

They told you it was mescaline but it tasted . . .

Patient

Yea, I know it was poison.

Doctor

Lie down.

Patient

OK, OK. I don't wanna die. I don't wanna die.

Doctor

You're not going to die . . .

F8/F9. MS patient in profile, camera pans to patient's vomit on the floor/CU patient in profile.

This articulation holds special interest as a deviant point-of-view figure. F8 concludes with a camera movement (pan) from the patient's face to what he sees. F9 returns to the patient, securing what Edward Brannigan calls a "closed point of view." Rather than guaranteeing simultaneity between shots, however, the articulation is a cue to abridgment. It lacks the guarantees found in narrative film such as an expressive reaction to what is seen or subsequent action that would imply simultaneity. Instead the sound track carries a verbal pause followed by a statement with logical and anological shifts from the previous statement:

Patient (before the cut, F8)

Anybody know how to sing or play music or something? I don't know. Oh shit.

Patient (after the cut, F9)

I think I should go back with my family.

The strong possibility of abridgment, an indefinite ellipsis, cannot be pinned down. We have no final recourse to an objective or absolute spatial and temporal scale. Continuity and its attendant realism is of an imaginary order and in Wiseman's films the impression of continuity emerges forcefully at the same time as the origins of this impression depends upon an active, and retroactive, reading of cues embedded in shots and their articulations.

A living language is a concrete fact—grammar is its abstract substratum. These substrata lie at the basis of a great many phenomena of life . . .

—V. Propp

The time has come to redefine Wiseman's mosaic structure or abstract substratum a little more precisely by way of conclusion. If a narrative consists of a number of functions arranged in a fixed order, then Wiseman's mosaic favors repetition of a few functions at the expense of the many. It is as though he had removed them from their narrative linkage and then substituted, paradigmatically, different variations of the same function. These substitutions are displayed con-

secutively but do not constitute a narrative order. The textual system is metaphoric (poetic) more than metonymic (narrative or expository), and supplemental or associative more than strictly additive.

Sequences in a Wiseman film exhibit the diegetic characteristics of narrative sequences although the whole film is not a narrative. Nevertheless, it is still possible for the whole of a Wiseman film to have some characteristics of a narrative sequence. In fact, Wiseman's films, as wholes, or mosaics, are remarkably similar in organization to the narrative sequence type Metz calls a bracket syntagma: "A series of very brief scenes representing occurrences that the film gives as typical samples of a same order of reality, without in any way chronologically locating them in relation to each other. . . . None of these little scenes is treated with the full syntagmatic breadth it might have commanded, it is taken as an element in a system of allusions. . . ." ²⁴ Even in the narrative context of his *grande syntagmatique*, Metz's description aptly conveys the poetic potential of this choice of sequence.

This form of overall organization is distinctly cinematic. It adopts the strategy of organizing the whole in terms of the characteristics of a cinematic part. As such it is akin to Godard's use of band construction (lateral tracking shots) in *Weekend* and *One Plus One*. ²⁵ As a bracket syntagma Wiseman's mosaic also bears comparison with Michael Snow's use of the autonomous segment (long take)/zoom in *Wavelength* or long take/tracking shot in *Breakfast*, or Paul Sharits's use of the single frame in *Ray Gun Virus* as controlling cinematic structures for the whole. It is in this sense that Wiseman's concept of the whole places him in association with the experimental film-making tradition. His films provide a distinctive fusion of extra-cinematic codes (especially those of existing institutions) with cinematic codes (the mosaic or bracket syntagma structure to the whole).

Wiseman does not seem to have developed this fusion for overtly formal or political ends. Politically, Wiseman's choice of an "ensemble of social relations" is extremely narrow and fails to examine the larger ensemble circumscribing the boundary between institutions and the public or the characteristics of class struggle found at that

boundary itself. Nonetheless, his films' structure carries a set of theoretical and ideological implications with it. Among them, it seems to me, is the political challenge to gauge the significance of his focus upon constraints more than linear causality and the relationship of this focus to historical materialism, especially to the constraints of ideology upon social role-playing. His films also issue a challenge to examine some of the overly generalized and at least potentially elitist critiques of narrativity and realism that have recently emerged, especially in France and Britain. While not self-reflexive in a formalist or political (Brechtian) sense, Wiseman's films are not simple transparencies of a bourgeois world which we, as spectators, passively contemplate. They demand an active/retroactive way of seeing, and raise more questions about the political uses of narrative, documentary, and cinematic structure than they answer. Rather than reject Wiseman's work for its limitations, we can use his films as a springboard for rethinking some of the assumptions and assertions made in the name of political, direct-address documentaries on the one hand and formal, self-reflexive avant-garde films on the other, in order to advance the struggle towards a materialist cinema across as broad a front as possible.

NOTES

1. Other Wiseman films include: *The Cool World* (1963), producer, Shirley Clarke, director; *Essene* (1972) about a Benedictine monastery; *Meat* (1976) about a slaughter-house/packing plant and *Canal Zone* (1977). This paper is based upon an analysis of all Wiseman directed films except *Welfare*, *Primate*, *Meat*, and *Canal Zone*. Except for *Welfare*, which I have not seen, these other films seem to pose significantly different problems of analysis and may require different hypotheses about their structure.
2. Ideology is meant in the Althusserian sense of our imaginary relationship to the real conditions of existence, a notion elaborated in his essay "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971).
3. Actions and enigmas are the terms of Barthe's proairetic and hermeneutic codes in *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, (1974), pp. 18-19. Of the five codes he defines they are the only ones with enough specificity to be useful in a range of contexts, ironically enough. The others can be regrouped into more specific cinematic or extra-cinematic codes.
4. See my article "Documentary Theory and Practice," *Screen*, vol. 17, no. 4 (Winter 1976/77), pp 34-48.
5. Stephen Mamber, *Cinéma Vérité in America* (Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1974), p. 4.
6. This argument is further elaborated in Eileen McGarry's "Documentary, Realism and Women's Cinema," *Women and Film*, vol. 2, no. 7 (Summer 1975), pp 50-58.
7. Barry Salt, "Statistical Style Analysis of Motion Pictures," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 1 (Fall 1974), p. 21.
8. See, for example, Peter Fischer, *Mosaic: History and Technique* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971).
9. Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society* (Berkeley, London, New York: University of California Press, 1975), p. 125.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
11. Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (New York: Oxford, 1974), pp 127-128.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
14. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin and New York: University of Texas, 1968), p. 21.
15. Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), p. 68. This concept is discussed on several occasions in the selection of articles on "Form and Pattern in Anthropology."
16. See Stephen Heath, "Film and System: Terms of Analysis, Part II," *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 2 (Summer 1975), pp 102-106.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
18. The editors of Cahiers du Cinéma, "John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*," *Screen*, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 14; reprinted in *Movies and Methods* (Berkeley, London, New York: University of California Press, 1976).
19. Anthony Wilden, *System and Structure* (London: Tavistock, 1972), p. 356.
20. The notion of role playing is best developed by Erving Goffman and played by Stephen Potter originally but applied to sociological theory by Peter L. Berger in *Invitation to Sociology* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), pp 131-134.
21. Donald E. McWilliams, "Frederick Wiseman," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 1, p. 25.
22. Personal communication with Fred Wiseman, No. 4, 1977.
23. A comprehensive taxonomy of POV figures appears in Edward Brannigan's "Formal Permutations of the Point-of-View Shot," *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975) pp 54-64.
24. Metz, *Film Language*, p. 126.
25. These Godardian strategies are discussed in detail in Brian Henderson's "Towards a Non-Bourgeois Camera Style," *Movies and Methods*, pp. 422-438.

LINKED CITATIONS

- Page 1 of 1 -



You have printed the following article:

Fred Wiseman's Documentaries: Theory and Structure

Bill Nichols

Film Quarterly, Vol. 31, No. 3. (Spring, 1978), pp. 15-28.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28197821%2931%3A3%3C15%3AFWDTAS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E>

This article references the following linked citations. If you are trying to access articles from an off-campus location, you may be required to first logon via your library web site to access JSTOR. Please visit your library's website or contact a librarian to learn about options for remote access to JSTOR.

Notes

²¹ **Frederick Wiseman**

Donald E. McWilliams

Film Quarterly, Vol. 24, No. 1. (Autumn, 1970), pp. 17-26.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28197023%2924%3A1%3C17%3AFW%3E2.0.CO%3B2-P>

NOTE: *The reference numbering from the original has been maintained in this citation list.*